



MY TURN/RICK LARSON

Capping harbor pollution moves city forward

THE NEWS-SUN'S FRANK Abderholden reported on the Nov. 13 meeting held to discuss the United States Environmental Protection Agency's approach to "cleaning" the Waukegan Harbor and included some comments from me in the article. I would like to expand upon those comments as I believe this issue is of overriding concern not only to Waukegan residents but also the northeast region of the State of Illinois.

To summarize, the EPA agrees with what the city has been saying in my years as an alderman — that the harbor can be safely "capped" (covered with sand) for a fraction of the cost of dredging. There is a huge difference in cost between the two options — an estimated \$9.6 million to cap and \$35 million to dredge. And it is important to understand the U.S. EPA accepts both options as being equally protective of human health and the environment. Think about that.

So why does the U.S. EPA want to dredge? The only justification to spend that extra \$25 million is to maintain a deep navigational channel for a wallboard plant and cement storage facility. These two enterprises collectively pay about \$200,000 in property taxes each year.

So, in essence, the U.S. EPA wants to use \$25 million of your tax dollars

to prop up two businesses that pay less taxes each year than an average block of homes in Waukegan.

How does the U.S. EPA attempt to justify such a monumental subsidy? They cranked out (and paid for) a "study" by something called the Northeast Midwest Institute that claimed that "almost all of the area's economic activity and municipal services depend in some manner on the harbor." That may have been true 50 years ago when we still had 25,000 jobs below the bluff, but to claim that now is pure hogwash.

What is true and accurate are the conclusions reached in the 2003 master plan that the city of Waukegan, after much public discussion and input, accepted from Skidmore, Owings and Merrill. We decided to move forward and put our industrial legacy behind us.

The council not only accepted a plan, but also took action by turning down a power plant proposal from Kinder-Morgan and defeated a plan by the North Shore Sanitary District to put a sewage sludge incinerator on our lakefront, even though these would have generated sorely needed tax revenue benefits.

Will turning our harbor and lakefront to a residential, open space, light commercial and marina-related business area make

economic sense and create jobs? We only need to look to at our neighbor to the north, Kenosha.

I called the Kenosha assessor this past summer and was told that their exciting harborfront development (which mirrors what Waukegan's master plan calls for) has in just eight short years generated over \$2 million in new tax revenues. The expectation is that it will jump to about \$2.5 million in revenues in the next two to three years when their project reaches completion.

So for about the same amount of lakefront property as the gypsum and cement plants sit on, they get over \$2 million more in annual tax revenues. Pretty impressive. And Waukegan has many times more lakefront land to develop than Kenosha.

What also has not been discussed or factored into the U.S. EPA proposal is the potential benefit to the Waukegan schools. Lakefront development will generate many millions in new sales and property taxes. District 60 will be the full beneficiary of these new revenues with little additional impact on the school population itself.

Everyone who truly cares about the future of our city, our schools and realizing the vision of our master plan, must pay attention to this issue. That is why I believe the future of our city should be

decided by your elected representatives, not by a federal agency like the U.S. EPA that clearly has another agenda.

One final point. That "extra" \$25 million can still be put to good use.

The U.S. EPA has not widely advertised this as of yet, but they estimate the cleanup costs to remove the toxins at the old OMC Plant 2 site right across the street from the harbor as being in the \$20 to \$25 million range. They propose, initially, to build an underground "dike" to prevent the toxins/PCBs found in the groundwater from running back into the harbor and Lake Michigan. Sounds like a good idea to me.

As an alderman, I cannot in good conscience stand by silently. I prefer to look out for our taxpayers and the future economic benefits of the entire region by ensuring we move forward with our master plan.

I cannot support propping up a couple of businesses to the tune of \$25 million when that money could be put to better use. I much prefer that Waukegan move forward, not be pushed back into the past.

I hope the taxpayers of this region now have a better understanding of the issue, the implications to their pocketbook and the future of our great city.

Rick Larsen is the alderman of Waukegan's 8th Ward